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SUBJECT: ESTONIA: FUROR OVER BRONZE SOLDIER DEBATE

REF: (A) 06 TALLINN 533

¶1. Summary: On January 10, the Riigikogu (Estonian parliament) approved a bill giving the GOE legal authority to relocate the graves of Soviet soldiers and the adjacent "Bronze soldier" statue from their current location in central Tallinn. Prime Minister Andrus Ansip has stated that excavation of the graves could begin in May. However, until March parliamentary elections determine the shape of the next government, it is unlikely any action will be taken. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (SBU) As previously reported (Ref A), ethnic and political tensions over the "Bronze soldier", the Soviet-era monument dedicated to the war dead of WWII, initially reignited in May 2006. On the anniversary of the "End of the Great Patriotic War Day", counter-demonstrations resulted in scuffles between ethnic Russians and Estonians near the monument. Subsequently, the Ministry of Interior temporarily cordoned off the park in which the monument is located and banned demonstrations near the site. The media coverage of these events was extensive, in part due to the highly prominent and visible location the Bronze Soldier in central Tallinn.

¶3. (U) Political leaders immediately began to debate the necessity of moving the Bronze Soldier to a less visible location outside of the city -- giving the justification that it would lessen the ability of radical groups on both sides to disturb the public. Prime Minister Andrus Ansip voiced his support for moving the monument, but acknowledged that in the absence of national legislation regulating the protection of war graves, the GOE lacked authority to take any action. The Tallinn city government convened a series of roundtable discussions that included Russian NGOs and local leaders, but could not reach a consensus.

Where There is a Bill, There is a Way

¶4. (U) Members of the three-party ruling coalition split over the issue: Center and People's Union opposed moving the Bronze Soldier while the Reform Party strongly supported the idea. In November, Vaino Lind, a Reform MP and the Chair of the Legal Affairs Committee, submitted the "War Graves Protection Bill" (WGP) to the parliament for consideration. The parliament approved this legislation, jointly sponsored by the Reform Party, Social Democratic Party, Res Publica, and Pro Patria, on January 10,

giving the GOE the legal authority to move war graves, markers, and monuments that are located in "unsuitable" areas. According to the law, the Minister of Defense will establish an independent War Graves Committee made up of representatives from the Estonian Association for the Maintenance of War Graves and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, Interior, Justice, and Culture. This Committee will have one year to present a list of War Graves that are deemed to be in unsuitable locations. The Ministry of Defense shall then decide, on the proposal of the Committee, which remains are to be reburied to which location. Opponents of the WGP have criticized it for being inflammatory. Supporters, however, emphasize that the WGP is in full compliance with the Geneva Convention, and includes provisions for the proper reburial of any disturbed remains.

¶5. (U) Prime Minister Ansip has publicly expressed his desire for the excavation process to begin in May. However, it is unlikely the GOE will take any action until March parliamentary elections determine the shape of the next government. In addition, any GOE effort to move the monument itself may face delays from legal challenges. Elina Elkind, an Advisor at the Ministry of Justice, told us that there is some ambiguity in the language of the law which opponents could use to challenge the GOE's right to move the Bronze Soldier.

¶7. (U) Another bill tangentially related to the WGP, the "Disallowed Construction Removal Bill" (DCR), has stalled in the Riigikogu. The DCR would authorize the GOE to prohibit the construction of and allow the removal of any monument or structure that glorifies

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the occupation of Estonia and/or incites hatred or disturbs public order. The DCR, which was also initially submitted in November, has been through only one of three readings in the parliament. The same four parties sponsored the bill, but gave priority to passage of the WGP. Raini Lind, the Director of the parliament's Legal Affairs Committee Secretariat, said that in her opinion the DCR will likely die in committee before the parliament's final session, February 22.

Is it History or Politics?

¶8. (U) Comment: Since re-independence the Bronze Soldier has become the litmus test of how ethnic Estonians and the Russian-speaking minority understand history differently. The former sees the monument as a provocative reminder of Soviet occupation, whereas the latter reveres it as a memorial to those who lost their lives fighting fascism. Unfortunately, the passage of the WGP bill so close to parliamentary elections, gives some credence to critics who say the sponsors of the bill are less interested in addressing history than in accumulating political capital.

GOLDSTEIN